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Occupying liminal spaces in post-conflict social welfare reform? Local professionals and international organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Abstract

This article presents the findings from a small-scale, exploratory, qualitative study on the perceptions of local managers working for international organisations involved in social welfare reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a post-conflict society. The findings explore the nature of the involvement of international organisations in the reform efforts during and after the war, characterised by the development of a parallel welfare system, imported understandings of social welfare issues and difficulties in ensuring that international projects are complementary to statutory services and embedded within the wider society. The nature of policy translation renders many of these projects and programmes unsustainable. In conclusion, the text argues for closer linkages between social welfare and development studies research and practice, addressing the political dimensions of welfare reform and the need for greater coproduction of post-conflict social welfare policies and practices with service users.

Key words: international social work, social welfare reform, post-conflict societies, Bosnia and Herzegovina, translation

Introduction: beyond ‘international social work’

When social workers and allied professionals engage internationally, they do so at the interface of social work and social development. Within this wider sphere of international social work (Healy, 2008), one of the most contested areas of practice is that which occurs in conflict and post-conflict environments. Much of the literature on ‘international social work’ remains focused on the skills, competencies and adaptations required of international (foreign, predominantly Western) professionals when working abroad. It is this group, implicitly or explicitly, who form the ‘we’, the discursive subjects, who are exhorted to become “responsive to local contexts” (Gray and Coates, 2008; 25). When the mainstream literature refers to societies in conflict as one of a number of “global challenges” (Cox and Pawar, 2006) or, even, as mere expressions of “security interdependence” (Healy, 2008; 35), the dangers of the reproduction of transnational power relations are all too evident. Social work and social development interventions may have global reach and impact, but they are always practised *in situ* and hence always locally embedded. However, this is a ‘local’ which is unrecognisable from many accounts of ‘indigenous’ practice. In specific contexts and conjunctures, the ‘insider’ – ‘outsider’ or ‘local’ – ‘international’ binary is never simple but, rather, folded into complex and multiple social practices, requiring “a new vocabulary and epistemology ... to capture the complexity and liminality of encounters” (AUTHOR’S OWN, 2009; 675). For this reason, Pugh (2000) has written of the emergence of a new “intermestic sphere” in which international and domestic power and practices merge.

Even more useful is the concept of ‘liminal’ space or state, marked by an “anomalous status” or as “an in-between state ... fraught with ambivalence” (Zaviršek, 2002; 268). Studying those occupying liminal spaces, acting as ‘intermediaries’ (AUTHOR’S OWN, 2009; 678), offers a particular insight into the dynamics of the role of international organisations in conflict and post-conflict settings. In this qualitative study, we privilege the views of local professionals employed in international organisations working on post-conflict social

welfare reform. The liminal position of these respondents allows us to address the topic from a different perspective, rarely discussed in the literature on international social work. Implicitly, much of this literature assumes that 'international' – 'local' linkages will be between trained social workers who may share a set of principles and competencies based on formal social work training. In fact, as we address below, the vast majority of the 'local' managers in the study were not trained social workers, but progressed through international organisations to important managerial positions because of other skills, not least their perceived 'reformist' or 'modern' outlook, their flexibility, and their competence in English. This adds yet another dimension to the ambivalences of their liminal positionality.

Whilst there is increasing recognition of the dangers of global social work hegemony through the practice of international organisations, there is also a danger in reifying and essentialising local actors and contexts as 'authentic' sites of 'indigenous knowledge' (Gray and Coates, 2010) and, hence, of an oppositional alternative. Of course, there can be no denying the importance of local contexts in shaping practices and the colonialism oppressive social relations inherent in riding roughshod over local voices and practices. Nevertheless, the binary between 'globalising' and 'indigenous' practices, just as the binary between 'local' and 'international' itself, is in danger of hiding as much as it reveals.

Paradoxically, the binary between 'local' and 'international' is a central structuring feature of interventions in conflict and post-conflict environments and, yet, is "impossible to maintain, in any meaningful sense, within the 'black box' of everyday encounters" (AUTHOR'S OWN, 2015; 91). In a world in which 'cultural identity' "is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'" (Hall, 1990; 225), there is a need to be sensitive to multiple, non-binary, positionalities and above all to see 'locality' and 'internationality' as, in Koutkova's (2016) terms, "a matter of social practice", as achieved or ascribed statuses which may be fluid and subject to change over time.

As has been argued, the true "empirical test" of social work's values, norms and ethics lies in addressing "daily working arrangements" (Staub-Bernasconi, 2010; 21). New approaches to international aid and development that utilise an ethnographic sensibility have opened up a number of fruitful new research questions. Mosse's questions "how does international development produce "expertise" and how does such knowledge work within the global aid system?" (Mosse, 2011: 2), is particularly relevant here. It can also be extended to the role of international social work and social welfare professionals. This text explores the nature of the interaction between "local" experiences and "international" development "expertise" in relation to social welfare reform in post-conflict societies.

Our research concerns go beyond social work *per se*, to explore broader social welfare reform efforts in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as a country affected by political conflict in the 1990s during the wars of the Yugoslav succession. The concept of social welfare is, of course, difficult to define and frequently refers to a broader social condition, beyond public or charitable assistance provided to assist families, communities and societies to reach an acceptable level of social well-being (Midgley, 1999). Nevertheless, here we refer to this narrow understanding, sometimes also referred to as social protection. We explore how it is

reformed in post-conflict societies through the interplay of governmental and non-governmental actors acting at diverse global, national and local scales.

We begin by addressing, in broad terms, some of the specificities of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a conflict and post-conflict setting, in which reforms pushed by a wide range of international organisations sometimes ignore, misinterpret or dominate over a long-standing tradition of state social work. We then turn to the methodology of the study itself, and some of the ethical issues inherent in it. We structure our findings into three broad areas roughly coinciding with our respondents' entry into international organisations; their perceptions of these organisations' reform work; and exit strategies and legacies as these organisations wound down their operations. This is followed by a summary of the research, an analytical discussion of our findings, and some broad conclusions.

A 'crowded playground': international actors and social development in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The 1992-1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina is estimated to have resulted in the deaths of over 250,000 people, with millions of people becoming refugees or internally displaced persons (Papić, 2001; 16). The Dayton Peace Agreement brokered in December 1995 stopped the war, but introduced a cumbersome administrative structure, dividing a weak central state into two, largely ethnically defined entities. This turned Bosnia and Herzegovina (henceforth BiH) into an "improvised state" (Jeffrey, 2013). During the war, BiH was the site of a large scale humanitarian intervention. At its peak (between 1995 and 2000), such funding is estimated at between 46 and 53 billion USD, including military costs (Papić, 2001; 18). In the aftermath of the peace agreement, BiH became a 'crowded playground' of social and political engineering for a wide range of diverse international organisations, constituting a new 'mobile sovereignty' (Pandolfi, 2003) of multi-mandated bodies occupying and transforming emergent spaces of power and governance.

The BiH Ministry of Finance data for 2010-11 suggests that international donor agencies invested around 1.03 billion EUR (305 million EUR as non-refundable grants and 725 million EUR as credits) during this two-year period (IBHI, 2013) in a country of 3.8 million people. Nearly half of this amount was meant to support economic growth and strengthen social protection. Clearly, then, international assistance efforts constituted the cornerstone of the BiH economy and a rare source of sustainable employment.

Within this, a significant number of 'local staff' was employed within 'the social sector', in international organisations which moved from "the survival care of the most vulnerable groups during the war" to "service delivery, training and system reform" (Cupper, 1997; 7). Although space precludes a thorough overview of the history of social welfare in BiH (for details, see Author's own, 2009; Author's own, 2012a; Author's own, 2014), it is important that reform efforts by international organisations rarely acknowledged the relatively well-developed social work and social welfare system throughout socialist Yugoslavia since the early 1960s. Crucially, public social welfare was organised through local Centres for Social Work (CSWs) which, during the war, became important centres for relief distribution and, after the war, a major target for reform. Indeed, during and after the war, nested sets of 'welfare parallelism' (Author's own, 2009) began to emerge in which the actions of local and

international agencies, on the one hand, and state and non-state actors on the other hand, operating in relative isolation from each other, formed 'parallel worlds', offering a patchwork of services or stand alone, time-limited, 'projects' according to client group and locality rather than a joined up or coherent system.

Social work was marginalised rather than strengthened by these diverse projects and strategies. This is the context in which our focus on the liminal agency of 'local' managers in international organisations needs to be situated. The broad aim of the study is to enhance knowledge and understanding of the processes, nature and organisation of social welfare reforms in post-conflict BiH through local managers' reflections on working on such reforms for international organisations, themselves the main drivers of and key stakeholders in the reforms.

The study: methodology, respondents and ethics

As appropriate for a theme which is relatively underdeveloped, our research methods are reflexive, exploratory and qualitative. The main empirical part of the study is based on semi-structured, narrative interviews with seven BiH citizens who held managerial positions, and played leadership roles, in international organisations involved in social welfare reforms in BiH. All seven were known to, and had worked with, the authors of the study in one capacity or another - mainly employing us in roles as consultants in the design, implementation or evaluation of reform projects. All of the interviews were conducted in local language(s) (BiH has three official, South-Slav, languages: Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian) and have been subsequently translated, by the authors, into English for this text. The seven local managers, including both men and women, and across a wide age range, worked for five different agencies: three international NGOs, a supranational organisation and a bilateral donor, all with a significant profile in terms of welfare reform.

The semi-structured interviews focused on a number of general themes relevant to the interviewees' involvement in social welfare reform, taking a more or less sequential approach. Respondents were asked about their backgrounds and work prior to involvement in social welfare; why and when they began to focus on social welfare; their early experiences in the field; the key issues they worked on; and the main similarities and differences between their war-time and post-war involvement and experiences. Respondents were asked to assess the role of international organisations in financing and implementing social welfare reform projects, and the differences in approaches between different international organisations.

Deriving, in part from feminist, critical social work, and post-colonial perspectives, narrative interviews allowed us to "shake off the scientific illusions of objectivity" (Fraser, 2004: 183), emphasising the subjectivity of the researcher as well as the interviewees. This was appropriate insofar as the researchers had prior involvement, professionally and often personally, in the lives of our respondents (Josselson, 2007). In a sense, that which was shared during the interview was the narrative which respondents chose to present at a particular moment in time. On occasions, respondents gave accounts which differed from accounts in earlier, private, conversations. We did not refer to these differences during the

interviews, reflecting a shared understanding that the interviews represented formal accounts that can be disseminated to wider audiences. Whilst the core meanings of certain themes and events were addressed and often explored in depth, this was only done to the extent that respondents were comfortable with, acknowledging the purpose of the interview and the explicit and implicit nature of the research relationship (ibid.).

Narrative interviewing is also well suited to capturing common themes and contradictions across shared experiences (Fraser, 2004). The use of sequential reasoning, focusing on experiences before, during and after the war mirrored the way experiences tend to be reflected upon by many people across the post-Yugoslav space. These proved to be the most meaningful thematic categories when exploring personal and professional narratives (Kohler Reissman, 2013) in relation to social welfare reforms in a post-conflict society.

In BiH and Croatia, where the authors worked at the time of the study, ethical approval is needed only for research with minors and people deprived of legal capacity. The research does however conform to the Croatian Code of Ethics in Science and Higher Education, guidelines which were established in 2006. All respondents were provided with an explanation of the study, gave an approval for participation at the start of the study, and again after approving their interview transcript. Six of the seven requested not to be immediately identifiable based on the content of their contributions or other descriptors, such as gender or age. For this reason, we have taken care to remove immediate identifiers from the quotes presented in the article. Instead, quotes are numbered in order to show the spread of quotes from different respondents.

Findings

The findings are structured around themes that emerged from the interviews and, as noted above, follow a nested set of temporal sequences, referring primarily to respondents' entrance into the field, main period of working and a later period when international organisations reduced their presence, developed an exit strategy and/or withdrew completely. Quotes from respondents are used to reflect the range of responses relating to particular themes. Where a small number of quotes are used, this usually means that most if not all participants gave very similar answers.

1. Entering the field

Importantly, only one of our seven respondents was a social worker prior to the war. The other six held a variety of positions in a range of professions before starting to work in social welfare during or after the war, ranging from politics and diplomacy, though medicine to the information technology field. Some were not yet employed due to their young age.

Respondents began working in the social welfare field due to their interests and experiences. This was also one of the few expanding sectors after the war. Despite different professional paths, the war happened to everyone from the region, with some impacted directly as forced migrants, and produced largely similar professional strategies:

“Because of the circumstances, the theme and the problems were near to me, because I had to work on them on the systemic level anyway, due to my job at the time.” (Respondent #1)

“[During the war] I saw a call for volunteers to work in a refugee camp. I had no idea about what it entailed, but was probably drawn to it as I was displaced due to the war, too.” (Respondent #2)

Indeed, two respondents began as volunteers working in refugee support projects working with non-governmental initiatives during the war. They expressed surprise about the level of funding available to non-governmental organisations, both local and international NGOs, as they started to arrive in the region:

“One thing I found surprising in 1992 was that a young organisation, such as the one I worked for, had extensive grants for what they wanted to do and available to them immediately. The funding came from a variety of bilateral and supranational funders. Maybe these funders had the money ‘at the ready’ and organisations working *in situ* only had to apply. I found this speed and the amounts available fascinating.” (Respondent #3)

The majority of respondents stressed that the content of the projects they worked on was largely modelled on programmes that international organisations had developed elsewhere:

“We mainly worked with refugees, with women and children. These organisations already had plans and programmes how to organise the work with refugees and displaced persons, whether they lived in camps or in the community. They started kindergartens and programmes addressing war-related traumas.” (Respondent #2)

Other respondents began working in the field in the mid-1990s, with one starting in the post-war period. Those who worked in the field during the war noted how most of the projects did not engage with local social workers working in Centres for Social Work. International organisations relied primarily on those who were not trained social welfare or social work professionals, with knowledge of English being one of the main prerequisites for their recruitment:

“There were maybe one or two social workers involved in the work. It was mainly psychologists and pedagogues. I don’t know, they presented themselves to these organisations as those who understood what needs doing. In parallel, the international organisations weren’t checking diplomas, but employed people based on their own assessments and interviews.” (Respondent #4)

“I actually got involved in the whole thing as a translator, rather than based on my diploma. There was a gap between their [international organisations’] professional orientation and what they did. People looked for employment wherever – language teachers, engineers, economist, you know, the criterion was that you speak English and that you can work on a PC at least a bit. That was the key during the war. Very few people had that knowledge here during the war. Those that did, they left the

country. This led to improvisation in practice. Only the consultants were professionals, but even the Heads of [international] organisations didn't understand the content of their projects." (Respondent #5)

This resonates with Duffield's (1994) concern with the 'expansion' of international NGOs mandates in the 'complex political emergencies' of the 1990s. Organisations, often with no prior experience in conflict settings, held both 'multiple mandates' and shifted these quickly in the context of shifting donor priorities.

International organisations also tended to lack an understanding of the context of the boundaries between different professions in the socialist Yugoslav health and social welfare system:

"Psychologists were mainly engaged in therapeutic work, as our social workers weren't trained to do this, as they are in other countries." (Respondent #2)

"The foreigners were mainly training us to work with traumatised people and, in their approach, psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers could all provide counselling and supervision. But the locals clashed here as to who can and cannot be a '*health worker*' [in English]. Who can work with psycho-trauma, and who cannot." (Respondent #3)

The broader context, of course, is that, for locals, paid jobs of any kind were scarce during the war, and working for international organisations was one of the few opportunities, to earn relatively large salaries, affording the possibility of survival for an extended family group:

"They always fed and salaried thousands of local people. What if they leave? [During the war] there was lots of funding and jealousy between different organisations, all of whom drove large Land Rovers, had big office spaces, and large salaries." (Respondent # 6)

2. The workings of international organisations: lost in translation?

It was apparent from most of the respondents that there was a high degree of 'disconnect' between the welfare reform projects they managed and the existing system of BiH social work. Crucially, many of the concepts that informed and shaped social welfare reform projects were imported and, indeed, translated (Author's own, 2015). They were not ones that originated, or were in frequent use, in the BiH social welfare system prior to, during, or after the war. Much of the liminality of our respondents derived from being situated in 'translation zones', creating what Lendvai (2015; 133) has termed "complex assemblages of policy dynamics".

Although interviewed in local languages, respondents all used a variety of English words or phrases throughout their interviews. As soon as interviews turned to discussing the work of international organisations, all respondents used some English words, sometimes whole

phrases and sentences, suggesting that they occupied a separate, bilingual, 'space'(highlighted in bold and italics below) which was largely created in English, and at best translated imperfectly into local languages.

“ [The project] had elements of welfare, in the **protection** sense, but they mainly had that psychological **wellbeing** focus.” (Respondent #3)

“As time continued, I understood that the World Bank mainly opts for **what is the most efficient way resource-wise**, while we thought, ‘OK, let’s see what is happening with the whole system and use those **adjustment credits**’. I think I realised how much it was focused on the economy, rather than on **social development**, where I felt more aligned.” (Respondent #7)

The key ‘translators’ of the imported social welfare projects were, as noted in an earlier quote, international consultants, employed to shape projects based on their experiences in their own countries or from supposedly similar ‘projects’ elsewhere. On the whole, these imported approaches and concepts were not promoting ‘bad practice’; most involved support for the development of community-based services, as opposed to existing institutionalised options that dominated social welfare prior to the war.

Nevertheless, these imported concepts and approaches were frequently ‘lost in translation’, contributing to a lack of full local ownership:

“The expert told me all kinds of things, it was all novel to me. He drew things, constantly kept explaining, ‘network social work’, ‘networking’, ‘networks and inter-sectoral collaboration’. The way he spoke – and it was constantly translated to me as I didn’t speak English – maybe it is down to the fact that the translator didn’t know how to translate it, too. He drew some eco-maps with triangles and what-not. I didn’t get it. It was all foreign to me.” (Respondent #1)

“Everybody came with a blueprint. Of course, it is difficult to expect that these organisations know the specificities of Yugoslav socialism - it was a relatively small country, so they perhaps generalised what they knew about the Soviet Union and those countries. And, really, the difference was very big, since Yugoslavia – you had many venues of participating in decision making, at least in health, education, on local matters, local government.” (Respondent #4)

These examples show clearly how “language is intrinsically bound up with questions of power – authorised ways of thinking, knowing and acting that attempt to travel along with the words” (Author’s own, 2015; 188). Despite widespread recognition of the multiple problems of transfer and translation, recognition of these were rarely built into projects - enlarging, in fact, the space for subversions and resistances to suggested reform models.

With clear policies and practices developed elsewhere, it is perhaps unsurprising that this resulted in the development of systems of social welfare that were parallel to governmental ones, rather than integrated:

“The non-governmental sector started developing in 1996, 1997. Up to that point, it was sporadic ... Why did it appear? Because the international organisations which provided the funding only funded big international organisations. They didn’t trust the governments and didn’t fund them. Hence, they didn’t fund the Centres for Social Work. This was silly, as these Centres were nonetheless expected to pass on the data on their service users, develop analyses and then an NGO, let’s say an Italian one, brings some 23-year old guy and pays him 5,000 Marks [about EUR 2,500] a month to run their social welfare project.” (Respondent #6)

“It was a parallel system, although there were some small-scale joint initiatives. But it was definitely more of ‘we are doing this, and we are telling you for your information’. All was shaped and formed and then the governmental organisations were informed. My approach was different. I would ask the Centres for Social Work: ‘what are your biggest problems?’ And we started to develop activities from that.” (Respondent #1)

While decision makers across different levels of government supported closer linkages with international projects in principle, they were not accountable to integrate the parallel system into the official welfare system:

“Part of the issue we face is also the frequent change of Ministers. When projects were started, they were approved by the local or regional government, accompanied with promises that they would fund these projects in the future. There was no assessment made at the time – nor was it expected by the funders – as to whether this is realistically possible. Those who approved projects weren’t sure they would be in the same position they were in when they approved the project, so they didn’t care.” (Respondent #7)

“Why are things going badly? There are bottom-up and top-down issues in terms of decision-making. No one wants to be held responsible. We have a management and accountability issue. I am not talking about managerialism, but there should be some structure of accountability and communication.” (Respondent #3)

3. Exit and voice: closure and lessons to be learnt

Our respondents’ experiences mirrored, to a large extent, different phases in the activities of international organisations. After the humanitarian phase during the war, and the expansion of activities after the war, a third phase, beginning in the early 2000s, involved these organisations developing. These involved reducing operations, permanent closure or, in many cases, the creation of local non-governmental organisations to continue the work, with significantly reduced international funding and support:

“It all started with what appeared to be ‘expenditure rationalisation’. Budgets were cut, as were the projects, and not in a way that was manageable or sustainable.” (Respondent #3)

“What was shocking was that even projects were cut and stopped when the decision was made to close an office, even for projects which had secured longer-term funding. The organisation simply decided to go and work in other regions, on other issues.” (Respondent #2)

This phase coincided with the development of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (OECD, 2005), which stressed the importance of local partnerships in aid and development. It also coincided with a myriad of new strategic planning tools in the early to mid-2000s, mainly supported by the World Bank (particularly poverty reduction strategy papers) and later by the EU (through social inclusion strategies). Despite emphasis placed on the bottom-up and participatory process through which these strategies were to be developed, all such strategies across South-East Europe resembled each other (Author’s own, 2012b). The period coincided with the arrival of a new important supranational funder, the EU. While EU previously provided humanitarian assistance, in the late 2000s it started supporting welfare reform through pre-accession funding.

The engagement of the World Bank and, particularly, the EU, necessitated closer linkages between reform projects and government ministries, but the implementation of such projects was often left to UN agencies, themselves struggling for legitimacy and funding in a post-conflict environment. In many ways, these new configurations of actors faced just as many political and organisational difficulties as in the earlier period:

“The general problem is that we don’t have a planning process for our social policies. There isn’t an authority in the whole country, even on the entity level, who could take stock of the overall system and set realistic plans and targets. Sectors don’t talk to one another and getting them to do so is slow. Everyone is the boss in their own village and no one really wants to talk to anyone else.” (Respondent #4)

Although the fragmented nature of governance in BiH clearly contributed to problems, it is far from the only reason why the proliferation of international organisation ‘projects’ and ‘strategies’ served to create more confusion than clarity through an assemblage of “uneven, contradictory and... unsustainable localised practices” (Author’s own, 2009; 684).

While respondents expressed concerns regarding the manner in which international organisations engaged in social welfare reform, they also identified good practices and suggestions for improvement. Crucially, they highlighted the importance of inter-sectoral collaboration and partnership work between different international organisations, focusing on the content and organisation of provision as well as its funding:

“Targeting and collaboration should have been better co-ordinated from the start. As this wasn’t the case, all the support dispersed into thin air. In the end, you do a million and one things, but you do none of them right. The donors were unco-ordinated, as was the government. [My organisation] was the same, and only recently started to change. You can only do anything up to a certain point, but you won’t manage to do everything unless you co-ordinate. It is hard to co-ordinate, it takes lots of patience and exchange of information. It is easier to lock yourself up in your office and do your own thing. But it pays off, long-term.” (Respondent #6)

“It wasn’t OK for the NGOs to fund all the work; it should have been funded by both the government and the international funders. Not everyone should have been licensed to work locally, as well. Money should have also been invested into improvements of the existing statutory services, rather than only the development of new ones, from the start.” (Respondent #7)

In addition, our respondents were clear that projects should have been funded on a longer-term basis, rather than for one or two years, at best. This was seen as the only way of ensuring that longer-term reforms are made sustainable:

“All of those projects were actually short term, when I look at it in hindsight. It was a killer tempo to initiate reforms. We should have taken time to develop everything differently from the start, with more time, more investment in this. Innovative reforms which also impact local legislation require longer-term support and better regulation, with clarity of roles and obligations. They should also be run by professionals within the statutory services.” (Respondent #3)

“All of the projects were too complicated and over-ambitious. Both because of the money involved and for people who were involved, too. Yet targets were set at a grand level, to show what a big change we are achieving. We had pilot after pilot, but none of them were properly implemented elsewhere. Also, some of the consultants were good ones – but no one is a miracle worker who can achieve a whole-system change in the three to four months for which they were engaged.” (Respondent #4)

Another point stressed by respondents was that it is important to establish mechanisms for developing and preserving institutional memory. This related to the unrealistic timeframes of reform projects, as well as to competition between agencies in the context of an increasing marketisation of welfare reform:

“So much was lost because we had no overall organization and co-ordination of all activities across the country. People didn’t want to talk to each other because they were in direct competition with each other. They all had a corporate mentality. The work conducted wasn’t social welfare – it was an industrial secret. This went so far that people didn’t want to share information as to which locations they will implement projects in, so that no one would encroach ‘on their turf’.” (Respondent #7)

Respondents also suggested that reforms have to be supported from below, with and by the local professionals who already have a remit to work on such issues, taking account of the local context:

“You are left with a project written by a foreign expert which even if they elaborated each steps, they still lacked knowledge of how it is to work on anything in this particular environment. It’s OK to copy and paste an excellent idea, but you have to develop and shape it based on the context in which you work.” (Respondent #6)

“You have to understand our mentality, that our people wait for someone to come along and sort out our problems. If you involve them, they can see that they can change things and initiate things, which is positive. I think it is best if you think of your work this way.” (Respondent #4).

Reliance on notions of ‘mentality’ are in danger of drifting into cultural essentialism, with international organisations tending to blame cultural influences if proposed initiatives don’t prove to be sustainable (Bećirović and Dowling, 2013). However, a case can be made that the nature of international assistance, in its form, content and scale followed by sudden dramatic reduction, created a ‘culture of dependency’ which failed “to prepare the country for sustainable development” (Papić, 2001; 14). The strengthening of the “local’ human resources of the ‘foreign’ sector” is not the same as strengthening ‘local human resources’. The liminality of local managers in international organisations shows, indeed, the failure to create spaces for dialogue, exchange and transformation.

Conclusions

Notwithstanding the small-scale and exploratory nature of this study, we have shown the importance of understanding the perceptions and practices of local managers working for international organisations as important factors influencing social welfare reform in post-conflict societies. The problems of welfare parallelism, the dangers of imported understandings of social welfare, and the tensions and confusions caused by ‘projectisation’ may have a wider resonance which would need to be identified through comparative research. Collaborations must be built in the future which are context-specific and which recognise and seek to challenge rather than reproduce dominant transnational power relations.

Our findings highlight some of the complexities of the encounter between the ‘local’ and the ‘international’ in social work and social welfare in post-conflict societies. Understanding the inter-connections of the global and the local within social welfare is complex and multi-faceted. It is important that international social work research establishes further collaboration and interaction with development studies. While the perspectives of international managers may have been unavailable within our study, their views and experiences have been captured in development research, particularly the work of David Mosse (2011). Such studies and analyses can be helpful to local practitioners and ‘reformers’ to deconstruct wider international involvement from a local perspective, and to inform and shape the politics of future reform efforts. In return, social work can offer the perspectives of grassroots local practitioners and, most importantly, service users, carers and other community members. Their perspectives are lacking from or co-opted in the current debate on reforms and mainstream scholarship on those reforms – despite being key stakeholders benefitting from the social welfare reforms. Lessons can be learned from the experience of local managers which contain, at the very least, principles for ‘doing no harm’ (Anderson, 1999) for international agencies in diverse conflict and post-conflict settings.

The danger of importing reforms that get 'lost in translation' and become 'hard to absorb' into local contexts is several-fold. Firstly, our findings can be framed not only in terms of the liminality of the position of local managers but also as a set of power-laden transnational encounters. Language is crucial here, not least because linguistic relations are 'unintelligible' outside of "the totality of the structures of power relations" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 143). Translation draws us into "the content, movement and contexts" (Authors' own: 38) of social work and social welfare in conflict and post-conflict societies. Translation is never about domination alone, however, and must be understood as a 'double movement' in terms of possible resistance to 'foreign' practices and the problematisation of language (McEwan, 2009: 11) as itself a site of contestation and struggle.

Secondly, respondents' statements can be set in the context of neo-liberalism as the dominant framing ideology for international aid and social development in post-conflict societies and beyond. Mosse (2011: 4) notes that the core of current international development involves a consensus on the union between 'orthodox neoliberalism' and 'new institutionalism', constructing the problems of poverty and violence as, more or less, a product of 'bad governance'. Within this, however, the answer is not a strengthening of the state and a return to state provision of public goods, but, rather, "giving resources to the governments to make markets work so as to reduce poverty" (ibid.). Even with a move to funding government-led projects through EU-accession processes, as opposed to direct international funding during and after the war, the reforms are, therefore, also introducing fundamental changes in the nature of social welfare policy, which have neither been acknowledged nor scrutinized 'from below'.

Finally, expertise-led, neo-liberal and international translations render that which is 'political' as if it were 'technical'. While respondents suggest lessons to be learnt, they largely remain within a dominant paradigm, and rarely provide more than a 'glimpse' of the possibilities for future social welfare reform in BiH. Reform is required due to the changed nature of the society and growth of new needs following the conflict. All contain a deeply embedded political dimension, with a lack of political will to create the wider governance system and social welfare that is fit for the citizens, rather than election results. Any future reform efforts will have to emerge from the grassroots and acknowledge the national and international political and policy dimensions of the reforms to date, as well as ensuring that the knowledge of local managers of international organisations is not lost. It is not only that "the tension between international and local agents was influenced by an imbalance in financial and technical resources" (Becirovic and Dowling, 2013:5). Rather, the nature of reform, even with a reduction in such imbalances, needs to be addressed. In order to do so, we have to recognise and reconceptualise social work as a politics-led and shaped practice – far more than service user needs-led. Bašić (2010/11) rightfully calls for local professionals to rethink their assumed apolitical stance and practice, and to focus more on advocacy on behalf of the rights of marginalised individuals and groups within the current social, economic and political context in BiH. In a sense, 'nothing about us, without us' in the BiH context now needs to extend to both service users and local social workers.

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